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ABSTRACT

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) has designated the week of September 17-21, 2001, as "Back to School Week." During this week, state legislators from throughout the country are encouraged by NCSL to contact principals and teachers in their respective districts and arrange for classroom visits to help students understand the pressures, conflicts, and difficulties that legislators deal with in trying to solve public problems. In general, these lesson plans outline for students the importance of representative democracy, the message that their voices count, and the valid role of special interest groups in the process. This booklet contains three lesson plans: "Compromise--Why Don't We All Agree?"; "Who Are Legislators?"; and "Participation--Where's My Voice?" Each lesson lists educational goals; suggests an appropriate grade level; notes time requirements; lists materials needed; outlines national civics and government standards; and provides a step-by-step guide for the teacher to follow in the classroom, including a vocabulary list, a main activity, reflection questions, and follow-up measures. (BT)

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NATIONAL CONFERENCE of STATE LEGISLATURES

Trust for Representative Democracy

America's Legislators Back to School Week--Elementary School Lesson Plans.

http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/lessonplans.htm#hschool

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Trust for Representative Democracy

American's Legislators Back to School Week – Elementary School Lesson Plans

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NCSL appreciates the efforts of Leah Breckenridge, Montclair Academy, Denver, Co., and Sandy Stokley, Ellis Elementary School, Denver, Co., in the writing of the plans; and Rebecca Reeder, Ft. Wayne, In., and California Senator Betty Karnette for the reviewing of the plans. Contributor: Karyn Reeve, Wilder Elementary School, Littleton, Co.

Lesson Plan I – Compromise -- Why Don't We All Agree?

Age-level: 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades

Overview

One of the most important concepts for students to understand is that conflict in the legislative process can be very productive. When people disagree, they must work together to find a solution that works best for everyone. Often through this debate, many details that may have been overlooked by one party will be noticed by another and brought to the attention of the whole group. Debate and compromise are useful ways of crafting the best solution to a problem.

In this lesson, students will work together to plan a class party. They will learn to compromise with each other in order to make the party work for everyone.

Goals

During this lesson, students should:

- Compromise with each other in order to achieve a common goal.
- Justify solutions suggested to achieve goal.
- Revise plans made by own group in order to gain approval of those plans by the other group.

Duration One 45 minute lesson.

Materials

- Worksheet for planning party – attached or at http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/E1party.ppt

National Standards

National Standards for Civics and Government, K-4 Content Standards addressed:

- 5-E Traits for Democracy

Vocabulary

Compromise
Negotiation
Majority
Party
Veto

Lesson

Introduction

Explain to the students that one of the most important skills for legislators to have is the ability to **negotiate** and **compromise**. Legislators must listen to and try to please many different types of people. They must all agree as a group about the laws they create. Legislators must **negotiate** with others to insure that the ideas that are most important to them are included in the laws. They must also **compromise** with the other legislators in by giving up or changing certain things they may have wanted in the laws. By compromising, legislators can at least get some of what they wanted to achieve in creating a law.

For example, it is Jennifer's turn to cook dinner for her family. Jennifer wants to cook spaghetti and meatballs for dinner, and she wants to make banana splits for dessert. Her mother wants her to include a vegetable. Her brother wants green beans. Her sister hates green beans. Jennifer likes salad. Jennifer **negotiates** with her brother and sister to get them to agree. Her sister will **compromise** and agree to a salad if she can have walnuts on her banana split. Her brother will **compromise** and agree to a salad for dinner if Jennifer will make garlic bread. They all agree, and their mother approves of the dinner plans. The siblings have found a plan that works for everyone.

Main Activity

Tell the students that they will be planning a party for the class, but they must find a plan that works for a **majority** of the class members. Tell them that any plan must have final approval from you, that you can **veto** any plan that you find inappropriate. Don't give any other rules for their planning.

Divide the class into two groups. Hand each group the planning worksheet for the party.

Explain that each group will have ten minutes to come up with a plan. At the end of ten minutes, the two groups will swap papers.

Explain that once the groups have swapped, they must come up with one plan for the whole class based on what they know the other groups want. Give them a new worksheet. Tell students to focus on the points they have in common. Give them ten minutes to revise their plan.

At the end of ten minutes, call both groups together and discuss both plans. Allow each group to revise the plan based on the discussion.

Put the plans to a vote, or create one plan based on the class discussion and then vote on it. Continue revising and voting until one plan emerges as the clear winner of the majority of students.

Remind students during this process that they have a common goal, and that if they can't agree, the goal will not be met and no party will get planned.

Note: This lesson could be very frustrating for students. The teacher should modify this process to make it instructive for the students based on their needs and level of understanding. The students should see that this process is frustrating, but not to the point of anger or to a breakdown of the common goal. Some groups may also need some guidance in crafting a plan, such as selecting a group leader and/or someone to write down the plans.

Closure

After voting, ask students what they noticed about negotiating and compromising with their fellow classmates. Make the connection between the classroom and legislators. Legislators must negotiate and compromise all the time as part of their jobs. Sometimes, this can be difficult for them. Sometimes, it is not.

Ask students to imagine they are legislators. How might they promote negotiation and compromise? Are there particular traits that legislators should have to be good at compromising?

Follow Up/Extensions

- Let the students have the party they have planned. By allowing students to put the solution they have crafted into action, they will learn important lessons about how difficult it is to create the best solution and to compromise to get that solution.

- Don't give the students any input about things they may have forgotten in their plan. If they forget to plan for napkins or a stereo system for the music, they will learn a valuable lesson about how difficult it can be to make the best plan.

Bibliography

The National Conference of State Legislatures website has interesting and instructive information about state legislatures. www.ncsl.org

This project is supported by a Robert H. Michel Civic Education Grant sponsored by The Dirksen Congressional Center, Pekin, IL.

Party Planning Worksheet

Theme:

Food:

Music:

Activities:

Decorations:

Lesson Plan II - Who are Legislators?

Age-level: 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades

Overview

Students often do not have an understanding of who legislators are and how they became legislators. This lesson will show students that legislators are regular people who decide to be involved in their communities by becoming elected officials. This lesson will also show students the process by which people are elected to office.

Objectives

Students should be expected to

- Participate in a class discussion of the election process,
- Know the names of some of the political parties (democrat, republican, green, etc.).
- Create a fictitious campaign poster for themselves, including campaign promises and a slogan.

Duration Two 45-minute sessions.

Materials

- Paper for posters
- Drawing materials (pens/pencils, markers, crayons)
- Worksheet for organizing campaign ideas is attached or can be found at: http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/E2legislator.ppt

National Standards

National Standards for Civics and Government, K-4 Content Standards addressed:

- 5-D Civic Responsibilities
- 5-F Citizen Participation
- 5-H Selecting Leaders

Vocabulary

Campaign
Candidate
Election
Legislator
Platform
Political Party
Run for office

Lesson

Part I - Introduction

- Ask the students if they know what a legislator is. (This might be a good time to briefly discuss the three branches of government if students have not already studied it.)

- Explain that legislators in the U.S. Congress make laws that apply to the whole country and legislators inyour state capitol make laws that apply to just your state.

- Ask students if they know how a legislator becomes a legislator. What kind of person can be elected to office? It is important to tell students that legislators are average people. They may own a restaurant, be a dentist, or they may have been homemakers. Mechanics, police officers, grocery store clerks, and engineers can all decide to run for office.

Main Activity

- Divide the class into small groups. Have the class imagine that each one of them will be running for office. What do they want people to know about them? What will make people want to vote for them?

- Tell students they will be using a worksheet to help them create a campaign poster.

- Tell students that they will be discussing qualities that they think are important for a legislator to have. Give the class 3-5 minutes to discuss and fill out the top section of their worksheet, "A Legislator Must Be..." Some qualities students might choose:

  Respectful of others
  Can work with others
  Dependable
  Courageous
  Honest
  Fair
  Intelligent

Hard working
Old enough
A U.S. Citizen

- Tell the students to think of issues they find important and will want to tell people about in their own platform. These could focus on school issues. Give the class 3-5 minutes to discuss and fill out the second section of their worksheet, "My Platform."

- Pass out materials for the campaign poster. Explain that students will use the qualities for a legislator and the platform to come up with a slogan for the poster. Students should fill out the last section of the worksheet, "My Slogan," and then complete the poster.

Closure

- Have students share their posters with the class. Collect worksheets.

Part II - Introduction

Explain that once people decide they want to be a legislator, they have to be **elected** by the people. They must **run for office**. The person must choose a **political party** affiliation (Democratic, Republican, etc.). They become a **candidate** and will run against other candidates from different political parties. In the **campaign** the candidate will put up posters, talk to the public and participate in activities to show the people what he or she believes is important. The candidate will tell the people what he or she wants to accomplish in office. This is called a **platform**. For example, someone might run on a platform of reducing taxes and improving the environment.

Main Activity

- Investigate local legislators' websites. What are their party affiliations? What is important to them? What issues have they worked to improve? What are their accomplishments?

- Divide the class into small groups. Have the students develop questions about an issue or two in their local area that a legislator might address. Have the students talk about what a legislator from their area might focus on in their campaign.

Closure

- Ask the groups to share with the class their ideas. Prepare several questions to ask the legislator when they visit the classroom for America's Legislators Back to School Week.

Follow Up/Extensions

- Have students send emails to those legislators. What do the students think of their accomplishments?
- Have students work in pairs to design a campaign poster for their legislator and send it to them.

Bibliography

Find information about legislators on the National Conference of State Legislature's website, www.ncsl.org .

Find information about civic education at www.civiced.org .

Find information about national standards for civics education at www.civiced.org .

This project is supported by a Robert H. Michel Civic Education Grant sponsored by The Dirksen Congressional Center, Pekin, IL.

Name _____

A Legislator Must Be...

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

My Platform

1.

2.

3.

My Slogan

Lesson Plan III – Participation -- Where's My Voice?

Age-level: 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades

Overview

Legislators represent the people in their districts, and they must work hard to support legislation that serves their districts, or they will not be re-elected. Therefore, legislators are actually very interested in what their constituents have to say. A legislator's job is to listen. A legislator's responsibility is to find out what the people want. A citizen's responsibility is to communicate with the legislators to share his or her ideas. This lesson will help students learn about the importance of communicating with their elected representatives.

Goals

Students will:

- Identify pressing issues of concern to them
- Learn about how Legislators communicate with their constituents
- Participate in a discussion about ways to solve an issue by communicating their concerns with elected officials
- Write a persuasive letter to a state legislator

Duration One 45 minute class

Materials

- Paper for letter writing
- Letter writing sample for overhead projector (optional)
- Envelopes and stamps

National Standards

National Standards for Civics and Government, K-4 Content Standards addressed:

- 5-A Meaning of Citizenship

- 5-C Rights of Individuals
- 5-E Traits for Democracy
- 5-F Participation in Government
- 5-G Political Leadership and Public Service

Vocabulary

Constituent
Lobbyist
Communication
Legislator
Legislation
Issue

Lesson

Introduction

- Use the guide on NCSL's website to find the name, address, and party of the local elected officials. http://www.ncsl.org/public/sitesleg.htm
- Ask the students how legislators know what their constituents want. Brainstorm ways this might happen. Put ideas on the board.
- Discuss with them that legislators hear from their constituents in many ways. They hear from individuals through email, phone calls to their offices and letters. Legislators also hear from their constituents through organizations that their parents might belong to.
- Ask students if their parents belong to any groups, such as MADD, AARP (maybe their grandparents), Sierra Club, Ducks Unlimited, Greenpeace and NRA.
- Explain that these groups represent many people, but give one message to the legislators. This message is something that is important to all the members of that group, so these groups are called **interest groups**. Some of these groups have a lot of money and can get a lot of attention, so some people do not trust the **lobbyists** who represent those groups. Legislators get points of view from many sources, not just lobbyists from large interest groups. Smaller **interest groups**, legislative staff and researchers, the media and concerned individuals all communicate with legislators. The legislators must take in all these opinions and make decisions they think their constituents want. The will not get re-elected if they make decisions their constituents don't like.

- Discuss with students that citizens have a responsibility to communicate their ideas and wishes to their elected officials.

Main Activity

- Explain to the class that today each student will identify an issue important to him or her and write a letter to a legislator.
- Help the students identify issues by brainstorming possibilities on the board.
- Once some ideas have been identified, model for the students some possible ways of addressing an issue. Students should include two or three possible solutions to the problem in the letter. Students should be clear about what the problem is and how they think it should be solved. Use the sample letter provided to show students what the letter should look like and how it could be structured.
- Provide writing time. Provide names and addresses of various officials and show students how to address and stamp the envelope.

Closure

Have students share some of their letters. Collect finished letters. Mail them!

Follow Up/Extensions

Students can:

- Share the written response from the legislator (if sent)
- Look up their websites and email them regarding issues they find important
- Attend community forums sponsored by local elected officials
- Visit the state capitol

Bibliography

Find information about legislators on the National Conference of State Legislature's website, www.ncsl.org .

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Sample Letter

Larry Breckenridge
1830 Carr St.
Lakewood, CO 80215

Senator Susan Boyd
13 Capitol Drive
Office 210
Denver, CO 80215

Dear Senator Boyd:

I am a constituent in your district and I have some concerns about the following issues. I live near several open-space parks and I am a dog owner. None of the parks in my area allow dogs off of leash. I have a well-behaved, well-trained large dog that loves to run off-leash. In fact, it is the only way to give my dog ample exercise. As a result, I would like you to sponsor legislation to allow certain areas or certain hours as a "free dog zone." The dog owners in your district will thank you.

Cherry Creek State Park has a leash-free zone and it works very well. People who enter the area are aware that dogs are off-leash and realize that occasionally, dogs will misbehave. However, in general, there are few incidents and many happy dogs.

Please change the rules of the open space parks to allow leash free areas and hours.

Sincerely,

Larry Breckenridge
Registered Voter